

Help Make a Home for New Jersey's Fish and Wildlife



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Fencing protects a stream in Salem County from overgrazing.



A fish notch in the Raritan River, Somerset County makes it easier for fish to travel upstream

New Jersey's municipalities, rural or urban, support an astonishing diversity of fish and wildlife. The state harbors numerous species including approximately 470 species of fish, 89 types of mammals, 44 varieties of reptiles and 35 types of amphibians. New Jersey is particularly important to birds, giving refuge to 440 species, each of which has very specific needs for foraging and nesting. Our state's wildlife diversity is due largely to the variety of habitats available. The state lies at the northern and southern extent of the range of many species, has a mix of salt and freshwater environments, a long coastline, highly variable soil types that support a diversity of plant communities and numerous rivers.

Animals depend on habitat, which is comprised of food, water and shelter. Each species has its own unique habitat requirements. Thus, as goes the habitat so goes the wildlife species depending on it. Although diverse and extensive, New Jersey's wildlife habitats have been affected by the activities of our ever-increasing human population. For example, the state has lost more than half of its wetlands, approximately 584,000 acres; many stream banks lie denuded of vegetation; and the diversity of trees in some urban open spaces has decreased to only a few species. The good news is that municipalities have low-cost opportunities to reverse these trends and become partners in conservation by creating, restoring, and enhancing fish and wildlife habitats.

Why should a municipality pursue habitat projects?

There are many reasons to improve habitat! The most obvious is the benefit to fish and wildlife. National Wildlife Refuges and State Wildlife Management Areas comprise only 8 percent of New Jersey. The state's wildlife populations cannot survive on these lands alone. Additionally, benefits from habitat projects often include improved water quality, reduced erosion, better air quality, new educational opportunities and wildlife viewing. Habitat projects often bring together local governments and their environmental commissions with volunteer groups and individual landowners to form partnerships that strengthen and improve the community. If a municipality acquires land, such as an old farm, and is looking for something to do with it, then habitat restoration may be the perfect alternative.

How can I start a habitat project?

An excellent way municipalities can provide wildlife habitat is to establish a project through the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (Service) Part-

ners for Fish and Wildlife (Partners) program. The Service implements Partners as a small national program to create, restore and enhance important fish and wildlife habitats on non-state and non-federal lands. In addition to municipalities, Partners collaborates with private and corporate landowners and counties.

Partners provides an opportunity for municipalities with a genuine interest in their wildlife to voluntarily help further New Jersey's amazing natural resources. This program builds on the strength and interest of committed individuals and organizations to accomplish shared conservation goals. Since the program's New Jersey debut in 1991, we have helped restore more than 6,500 acres of wetlands, 3,000 acres of uplands, and 49 miles of riparian area.

Where can habitat projects take place?

Some of the areas in New Jersey that most need help include disturbed salt marshes, overgrazed or urban riparian areas, drained wetlands, filled vernal pools, former cranberry bogs, degraded grasslands, and

fragmented forests. Partners has completed projects in all counties of the state in rural and urban environs. Partners prefers to work in areas with the greatest potential benefits for fish and wildlife. However, an area of almost any size in any part of the state can be turned into good wildlife habitat if the landowner is committed. Partners projects often target migratory fish and birds, but all native wildlife, from butterflies to bats to salamanders, can be the focus.

How do I sign up?

Partners does not have an application process. If you are interested, please contact us and we will discuss ideas and possibly schedule a site visit. Partners requires that municipalities agree to leave a project's habitat restoration measures in place for at least 10 years to ensure that wildlife benefits from the resources invested in the project. This commitment is included in a "Partners Agreement" signed by the municipality and the Service. The agreement also includes an outline of the proposed work and an estimated budget. On an ongoing

basis, proposed Partners projects are evaluated for their restoration potential and for meeting the program's goals and guidelines. Partners cannot work on projects required as mitigation under permitting authorities of the state or Army Corps of Engineers.

Because of federal funding limitations, cost-sharing is an integral part of Partners projects. In-kind services (e.g., labor, machinery, materials) and funds from a variety of partners (e.g., conservation organizations, foundations) are often essential to successful projects. The Service prefers to provide an assisting role. As "Partners" implies, we look for collaborative efforts that maximize the number of parties involved so there will be a net benefit to the community's understanding about wildlife and a positive benefit to wildlife habitat. A Partners project belongs to the municipality and its residents, not the Service.

What can Partners do for you?

The Service, through Partners, can offer many types of assistance with project design and implementation. Work we have done for municipalities has included:

- providing native shrubs and trees, bird nest boxes, bat boxes, native warm-season grass seed and equipment;
- restoring wetland hydrology by plugging drainage ditches, installing water control structures, removing drain tile, excavating shallow wetlands, and assisting with permitting, if required;
- improving plant diversity by reforesting uplands to reduce fragmentation, planning and assisting with invasive species management, establishing native grassland and wildflower meadows, and developing wildlife-friendly mowing practices;
- enhancing streams and riparian areas through installing fish ladders for migratory fish, improving instream habitat, replanting eroded stream banks with native shrubs, removing dams, fencing stream banks to reduce cattle access, and establishing stream buffers; and
- collaborating with volunteer groups and others to assist with projects and coordinating with other helpful federal programs, such as the Natural Resources Conservation Service's

Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program, and leading nongovernmental organizations, such as New Jersey Audubon Society.

- Highland Park in Middlesex County is working with Partners to turn a degraded site along the Raritan River into a reserve for wildlife.

THE GOOD NEWS IS THAT MUNICIPALITIES HAVE LOW-COST OPPORTUNITIES TO REVERSE THESE TRENDS AND BECOME PARTNERS IN CONSERVATION BY CREATING, RESTORING, AND ENHANCING FISH AND WILDLIFE HABITATS.

What are some examples of current projects?

- The Town Forester in Millburn, Essex County is planting native trees, removing invasive plants, and excavating a wetland.
- The Environmental Commission in Vineland, Cumberland County converted an overgrown patch of invasive autumn olive into a native warm-season grassland.
- The students of Harmony Township Elementary in Warren County planted trees and shrubs along a drainage way, installed nest boxes, and are creating a meadow.
- Stillwater Township in Sussex County is improving wildlife habitat at their Pond Brook Park for wood turtle, wood duck, federally threatened bog turtle, and passerine birds.
- Morris County Municipal Utilities Authority dug vernal pools that will help threatened breeding amphibians.
- Hamilton Township in Mercer County established a native warm-season grassland and planted shrubs and trees along a wetland restoration.
- Franklin Township in Somerset County established a large tract of native wildflower and warm-season grassland, created a wetland, and established wildlife-friendly mowing practices.
- The Mannington Township Environmental Commission in Salem County helped coordinate with several landowners to control invasive common reed and to replant some of the project area with trees.
- Port Republic in Atlantic County is aerially spraying a large tract of invasive common reed along Nacote Creek partly to improve bald eagle foraging habitat.

In addition to the examples listed, Partners continues to look for new and innovative ways to improve habitat in New Jersey with your help. Stewardship of fish and wildlife populations is necessarily collaborative but should not require great effort and cost. By voluntarily working together, we can continue rewarding partnerships that produce real change.

For more information please write or call us at:

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